The film deals with a young German man, Sven, who arrives in a Polish town. It turns out to be Auschwitz .He has come do his national service at the youth hostel that belongs to the educational wing of the Auschwitz "museum". He has been billeted with an elderly man, Mr Krzeminsky, who seems to spend his time repairing suitcases. It turns out that this rather taciturn old man is a concentration camp survivor. Sven is to help take care of him and take him to places such as “gym for the elderly”, something about which Mr Krzeminsky is not at all keen!

Initially there is little understanding between the two, but gradually as the film progresses Sven comes slowly to understand that the old man sees himself as having an important task. Fixing the old suitcases is not just about the items, but about being true to the memory of what has occurred at Auschwitz.

The conservators at the Auschwitz Museum however, much as it might pain them on one level, are fed up with the old man’s repairs. They do not fit with modern conservation methods. Not prepared to tell the old man themselves, they leave this task to Sven.

Eventually Sven returns and pinches a case when no one is there and hides the one the old man has already repaired. Later in the film he will be discovered and berated for this behaviour by the youth hostel director of education

A secondary story is a simple love story between Sven and Ania, a guide at the museum. The director of education arranges for Ania to billet him, as it does not work for him to stay with Mr Krzeminsky. In order to accommodate Sven, Ania asks her brother to move out. An argument ensues between the siblings. This makes for another slightly uncomfortable beginning for Sven. Ania explains that her brother has simply overstayed for 3 months.

Besides helping out with Mr Krzeminsky, Sven also helps out at the youth hostel seminars for German students. In an early scene, the director of education holds a post Auschwitz tour debrief with a group of students. They give their reactions to what they have just seen. They have been deeply affected.

Sven drives Mr Krzeminsky to several places including a café- bar where he has a beer with old friends. Jokes are made about him having a German driver. Several times in the film, jokes are made about Sven (in the pub, at a lakeside picnic) each one relating to him being German, and therefore indirectly referring to the Nazi past.

Mr Krzeminsky is invited to speak to some apprentices at a factory that has been taken over by a German company. At the end of the talk, he is asked inane questions. Sven observes this and later in the film when he has to take Mr Krzeminsky to the opening of a memorial (on the spot where the fate of Auschwitz inmates was decided by camp doctors) we becomes aware of Sven’s distaste at the official proceedings. When we see Mr Krzeminsky push away the factory manager who wants to pull him towards the mayor for a photo shoot, we are made aware of the shallowness of the people who have set up the ceremony for the dedication of the memorial. Sven watches and later tries to talk to the manager.

Earlier in the film Sven goes on a bike ride with Ania. As they cycle through the pretty village, Sven suddenly realizes that this ordinary village was once made up of concentration camp barracks. In the ensuing conversation, he asks Ania how she can live there and accept the history. Her answer is that she after all was born there. She comments on the paradox that he too lives there and that he is after all German.

Later in the film Ania who has earlier told him she does not want to end up as someone who drags home a drunken husband, tells him of an opportunity she has to go to Brussels to work as a translator. He is somewhat upset, and she says that it is her one chance at something bigger and of leaving the place.

We learn that Mr Krzeminsky has a sister. Sven meets her when she tries to visit Mr Krzeminsky but he is not at home. It appears Mr Krzeminsky is often not there when she comes. Sven eventually takes Mr Krzeminsky to visit his sister, somewhere in the country. She tries to persuade him to come and stay with her family. An argument ensues and he tells her that no one has ever understood him. No one seems to understand his special task.

Mr Krzeminsky has a fall in his bathroom. Sven finds him. Mr Krzeminsky eventually accepts that now that the conservators no longer allow him to repair the suitcases he will go to his sister. He confides to Sven the promise he made all those years ago when they only had an hour to pack their lives into those suitcases.

Sven disillusioned with the treatment of Mr Krzeminsky and what Ania has told him decides to leave. Ania is shocked even though earlier she had told him she did not really think they had a real future together.

At the railway station, waiting for his train to Berlin, Sven decides to help a German teacher with a new group of students who seem lost. He offers to take them part of the way. On the bus on the way to the camp, the teacher talks to Sven about the fact that “this black chapter in history” must not be forgotten. The film ends. We do not know whether Sven will return to the youth hostel (and Ania) or go back to station to catch the train to Berlin. Early in the film he had explained to Ania that he ended up in Poland by accident. Initially he was to go to Amsterdam but this had fallen through.

Whatever happens, we know that the experience of those few months will have changed Sven.

**The film is partly based on the experiences of the director in 1996/97.. He did his national service in Auschwitz.**